

How exactly is unemployment measured?

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Preface

About the Office for National Statistics

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) is the government agency responsible for compiling, analysing and disseminating many of the United Kingdom's economic, social and demographic statistics, including the retail price index, trade figures and labour market data, as well as the periodic census of population and health statistics. The Director of ONS is also the National Statistician.

A National Statistics publication

Official statistics bearing the National Statistics logo are produced to high professional standards set out in the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. They undergo regular quality assurance reviews to ensure that they meet customer needs. They are produced free from any political interference.

1. Introduction

To most people unemployment is a very simple concept - anybody who does not have a job. However, it is not as straightforward as this would suggest. For example, are all of the following people unemployed ?

- someone over 65 who claims a pension?
- someone who is long-term sick and cannot work?
- someone who works 3 hours a week on a Sunday and is seeking a full-time job?

These are difficult issues and we need a commonly accepted definition of unemployment. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) uses the Labour Force Survey as its source for unemployment.

The Labour Force Survey is based on a random sample throughout the United Kingdom. This is conducted every three months using around 53,000 households. The survey collects information about the personal circumstances and work of everyone living in these households.

Around the middle of each month, the Office for National Statistics releases statistics on the number of people who are unemployed in the United Kingdom for the latest available three-monthly rolling period. Other statistics on the labour market are published at the same time, including data on those in jobs and those who neither have jobs nor seek work. Statistics are also published on the monthly count of those claiming unemployment related benefits, i.e. Jobseeker's Allowance. These figures receive wide coverage in the media.

2. Concepts

2.1 Unemployment

The definition of unemployment is internationally agreed and recommended by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) - an agency of the United Nations. The Statistical Office of the European Union (Eurostat) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and other countries use this definition.

Under the LFS guidelines, all people aged 16 and over can be classified into one of three states: in employment; unemployed; or economically inactive.

Unemployed people are:

- without a job, want a job, have actively sought work in the last 4 weeks and are available to start work in the next 2 weeks, or
- out of work, have found a job and are waiting to start it in the next 2 weeks.

In general, anybody who carries out at least one hour's paid work in a week, or who is temporarily away from a job (e.g. on holiday) is in employment. Those who are out of work but do not meet the criteria of unemployment are economically inactive.

Under most circumstances classification according to these concepts is quite clear. For example:

- John Boyd reported to the interviewer that he worked 36 hours last week as a lorry driver.
- Wendy Winger lost her job as a secretary three months ago. Every week she visits an employment agency to try to find a new job, which she would be able to start immediately.
- Ladonna Williams looks after her one-year-old son. She neither holds a job, nor wants a job.

In these examples, only Wendy is unemployed as she is out of work, wants work, has actively sought work in the last four weeks and is available to start work within two weeks.

John is in employment, because he worked more than 1 hour during the reference week. He could be either an employee or self-employed within the employment category.

Ladonna is economically inactive, she does not want or have a job. Ladonna would be classified as economically inactive – looking after family/home.

3. Measuring Unemployment

3.1 The Labour Force Survey

The ONS publishes two different measures of people who want to work but do not have a job; LFS unemployment and the Claimant Count.

The Labour Force Survey provides estimates of both the unemployment level and the unemployment rate. It is the rate that is the best indicator, because it measures the proportion of the economically active population who are unemployed and so takes account of changes in the size of the population over time, as well as changes in the level of unemployment.

The Labour Force Survey (LFS) measures unemployment. It is a legal requirement for every country in the European Union to conduct a Labour Force Survey. The LFS is a sample survey of people living in private households, students' halls of residence and NHS accommodation.

The survey asks a series of questions about respondents' personal circumstances and their activity in the labour market. Under International Labour Organisation (ILO) definitions, every respondent (aged 16 or over) is:

in employment;

unemployed; or

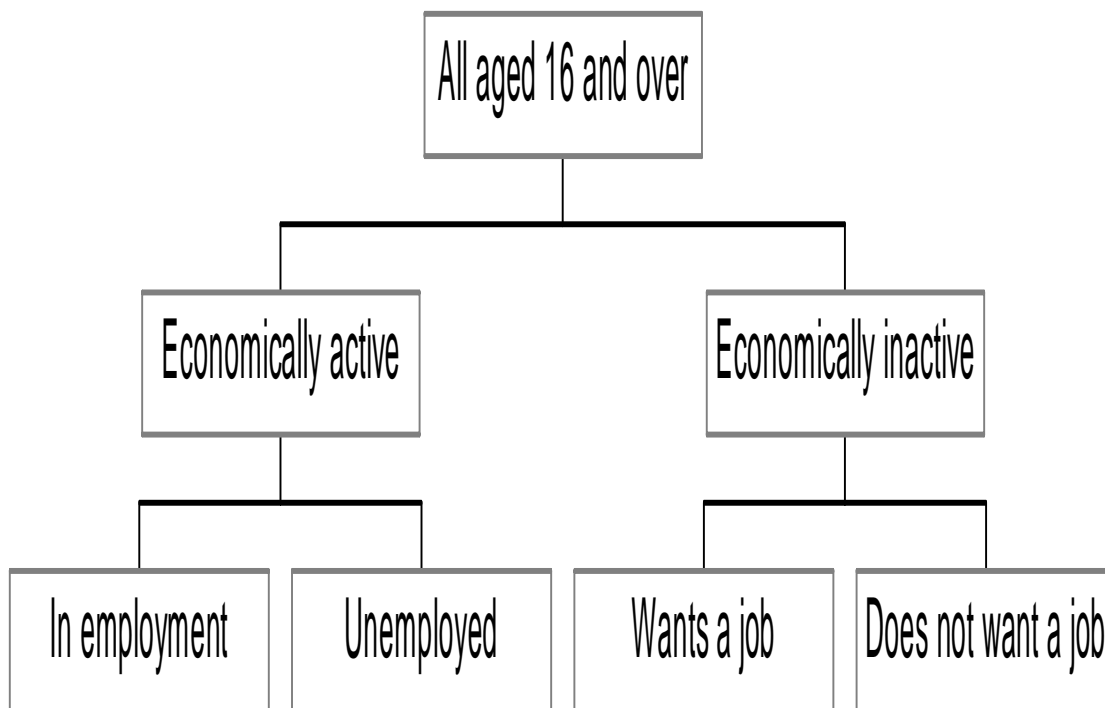
economically inactive.

If a person does at least one hour's paid work during the week before the interview or is temporarily away from a job (e.g. on holiday), then they are in employment. Also counted as in employment are people on government-supported training schemes and people who do unpaid work for their family's business.

The definition of **unemployed** people appears at Section 2.

Those who are without a job in the week before the survey, but are not unemployed are **economically inactive**. Chart A shows how everyone aged 16 or over fits into one of these categories.

Chart A: International Labour Organisation classifications



The following examples illustrate how the classifications work:

- Abdul Rajid has no job from which he receives any pay or profit. However, he helps in his parents' shop for around 20 hours per week.
- Tandisha Brown is currently receiving training at a local hairdresser. This is being partly paid for by the Government. She works 28 hours a week and goes to college for 1 day per week.
- Harry Thomson is out of work, but stopped looking for new jobs a year ago as he does not believe that any jobs are available.

Both Abdul and Tandisha are in employment, since they are both contributing to the economic wealth of the nation. Abdul is an unpaid family worker and Tandisha is employed on a government supported employment training programme. Harry is economically inactive as he is out of work and has not looked for work in the last 4 weeks and is therefore neither in employment nor unemployed.

3.2 Unemployment rates

In presenting measures of unemployment, the ONS gives more weight to the **unemployment rate**. As the LFS is a household survey this measure is on a residence basis. The unemployment rate is the proportion of the economically active who are unemployed. The economically active are people who are either in employment or unemployed.

The unemployment rate allows unemployment to be interpreted in the context of other changes. In particular, movements can be seen in the light of changes in the population and in economic activity.

The unemployment rate relates unemployment to the area where unemployed people live. This allows a comparison of unemployment rates between areas of the United Kingdom.

3.3 Issues relating to unemployment

The Labour Force Survey was carried out every two years from 1973 to 1983. In 1984 the United Kingdom adopted the ILO definition of unemployment in the LFS. This was also the first year in which the survey was conducted on an annual basis with results available for spring quarters (representing an average of the period of March to May). The survey moved to a continuous basis in spring 1992 in Great Britain and in winter 1994/5 in Northern Ireland. Results were published 4 times a year. Since April 1998 results have been published monthly for the latest consecutive three-monthly period.

Publishing the latest three months' average data each month leaves several options for comparing over time. ONS recommends that, for seasonally adjusted data, all comparisons over time should be made with the preceding non-overlapping quarter. For non-seasonally adjusted data, comparisons should be made with the same period a year ago. For more details on this, see Annex A.

Unemployment is measured through questions asked in the survey and not by interviewing everybody in the country. Answers are then weighted to represent everyone.

As with any sample survey there will be sampling variability. The easiest way to explain this is by example. In the April to June 2010 period, unemployment in the United Kingdom was estimated to be 2,457,000 (seasonally adjusted). These figures were published in the August 2010 Labour Market Statistical Bulletin.

If we drew another sample for the same period we could get a different result. In theory, we could draw many samples, and each would give a different result. The spread of these results is the sampling variability. Once we know the sampling variability we can calculate a range of values around the sample estimate that represents the expected variation with a given level of assurance. This is called a confidence interval.

For a 95% confidence interval we expect that in 95% of the samples the confidence interval will contain the true value of unemployment that would have been obtained by surveying the entire population. For example, for April to June 2010, we can be 95% confident that the true level of unemployment was within 78,000 of the estimate of 2,457,000 (ie, within the range 2,379,000 to 2,535,000).

Sampling variability also affects changes over time. Changes in unemployment levels between three month periods are not always greater than the sampling variability.

Unemployment in the United Kingdom is estimated to have fallen by 49,000 between January to March 2010 to April to June 2010 (seasonally adjusted). We can be 95% confident that the true change lies in the range between a rise of 35,000 and a fall of 133,000. In this particular example, it is more likely that unemployment has fallen rather than increased.

Changes over time should be examined using the unemployment rate as it places changes over time into a wider context. However, the unemployment rate is still subject to sampling variability. The best estimate of the change in the unemployment rate between January to March 2010 and April to June 2010 was a fall of 0.2 percentage points (seasonally adjusted). We can be 95% confident that the true change in the unemployment rate lies within the range of a fall of 0.5 percentage points and a rise of 0.1 percentage point.

Unemployment as defined by the unemployment measure is not directly affected by changes to the benefits system. However, changes to benefits often affect people's labour market behaviour. For example, a change may force claimants of Jobseeker's Allowance to increase their job search activity. This may in turn increase the number of unemployed people finding work. It is right that unemployment should reflect changes in labour market behaviour - whatever the cause.

4. The Claimant Count: unemployment related benefits

4.1 The Claimant Count

The count of claimants of unemployment related benefits, which is known as the **claimant count**, is based on the administrative records of people claiming these benefits. Since October 1996 this has been the number of people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA).

The claimant count consists of all people claiming JSA at Jobcentre Plus local offices. They must declare that they are out of work, capable of, available for and actively seeking work during the week in which their claim is made.

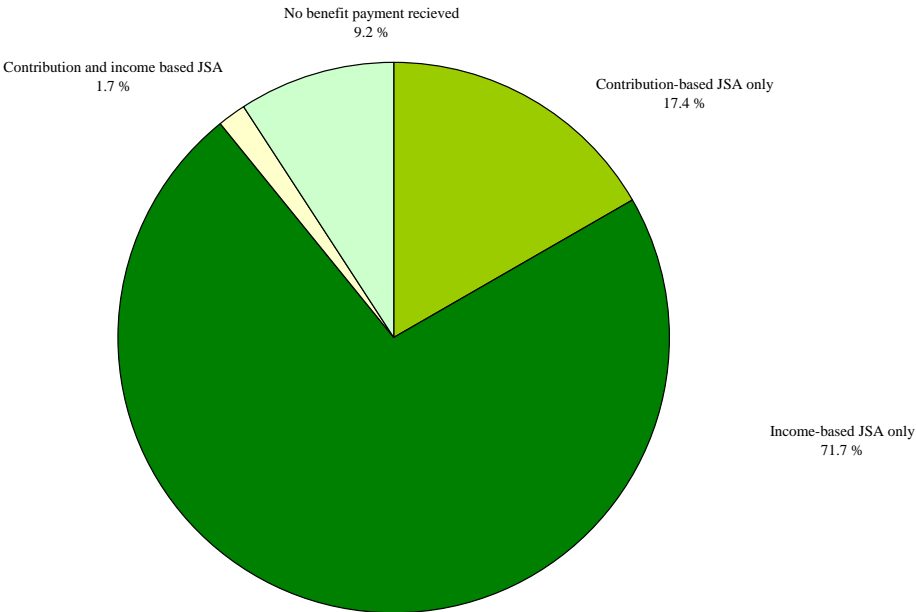
People who qualify for JSA through their National Insurance contributions are eligible for a personal allowance for a maximum of six months. This is contribution-based JSA. People who do not qualify for contribution-based JSA can claim a means-tested allowance. This is income-based JSA.

Some claimants do not claim JSA but sign on to maintain pension eligibility. These people claim National Insurance credits. See Chart B for details of the proportion claiming each of these benefits.

Those claiming JSA enter into a Jobseeker's agreement. This sets out the action they will take to find work and to improve their prospects of finding employment.

Annex B gives detailed information on the eligibility of various groups for unemployment related benefits.

Chart B: Claimants of JSA – by benefit type, February 2010



Source: Department for Work and Pensions

4.2 What information is available?

The claimant count is a by-product of administrative records of people claiming benefits. Each claimant gives their National Insurance number, address, sex, date of birth and marital status to the Jobcentre Plus local office. Details are also collected on the start and end dates of each claim and on the reason for ceasing a claim.

These details provide data on the number of claimants for one particular day (the second Thursday) each month (the stock) as well as the numbers joining and leaving the count each month (the flows). Analysis of the claimant count is available in some detail. For example an analysis of claimants by age and duration of claim are published every month. Figures are also available for a range of geographical areas, eg districts, constituencies, wards. Data that would allow identification of individuals are not published.

Detailed information is also available on the claimant history of a 5% sample of individuals. This is the claimant count cohort. This allows analyses of, for example, the characteristics of people who claim unemployment related benefits more than once.

The publication of claimant count figures is normally five weeks after the date to which they refer. This allows deletion of records of those who ceased claiming but whose details remain in the system. It also allows the addition of new claimants who started claiming before the date but whose records were not on the system at that point. The publication timetable includes time for preparation of the figures.

4.3 Claimant count rates

Claimant count rates at national level and for Government Office regions are calculated by expressing the number of claimants who are resident in each area as a percentage of workforce jobs plus the claimant count. Workforce jobs are the sum of:

- employee jobs;
- self-employment jobs;
- Her Majesty's Armed Forces;
- Government supported trainees.

The largest part, the employee jobs, represents jobs by the location of the employer. The estimate of workforce jobs therefore tends to reflect the location of jobs rather than the residence of jobholders.

For sub-regional areas, comparisons are published in the form of the claimant count expressed as a proportion of the local resident population aged from 16 to 64. These proportions avoid distortions to rates, which would be caused by commuting patterns, if they were calculated as above for smaller areas.

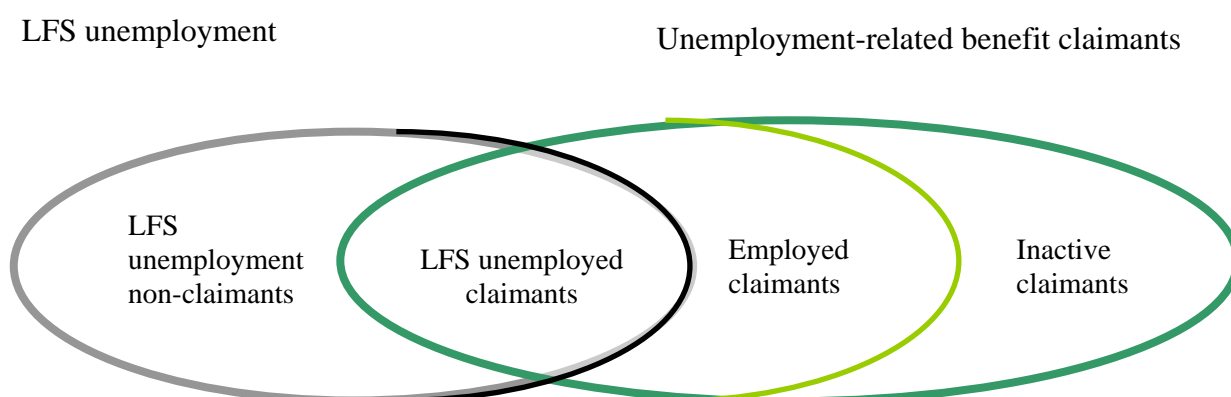
4.4 The claimant count and unemployment

There is a large degree of overlap between the claimant count and unemployment although the latter figures are generally higher. People who are not claimants can appear among the unemployed if they are not entitled to unemployment related benefits. For example:

- people whose partner is working;
- young people under 18 who are looking for work but do not take up the offer of a Youth Training place;
- students looking for part-time work or vacation work; or
- people who have left their job voluntarily.

Similarly, claimants of unemployment related benefits may not appear in the measure of unemployment if they state that they are not seeking, or are not available to start work. Claimants in a paid job may also not appear; in certain circumstances people can claim such benefits while they have relatively low earnings from part-time work. These people would not be unemployed. Chart C illustrates the relationship between unemployment and the claimant count.

Chart C: Relationship between unemployment and unemployment related benefit claimants



The claimant count is directly affected by changes to the rules governing entitlement to unemployment related benefits. This means that comparisons over time are affected by changes to the benefit system. Every time such changes have occurred, ONS has quantified the size of the effect and released the details. The last major change was in October 1996 when JSA was introduced.

The present seasonally adjusted claimant count series, which goes back to 1971 for the United Kingdom, is estimated on a basis consistent with the current coverage, i.e. it allows for the significant changes to benefit rules, etc. The non-seasonally adjusted series include all claimants aged 16 and over while the seasonally adjusted series includes all claimants aged 18 and over. This difference in coverage exists because restricting the seasonally adjusted series to those aged 18 and over was the only realistic way of maintaining the consistent series back to 1971, following a rule change in 1988 which resulted in most 16-17 year olds becoming ineligible to claim unemployment-related benefits.

The claimant count is published more quickly than the Labour Force Survey. Using the two sources together provides a more comprehensive picture of the labour market. Unemployment statistics obtained from the Labour Force Survey also go back to 1971.

5. Regional and local statistics

Neither the claimant count nor the unemployment series are seasonally adjusted below regional level. This means that comparisons over time for sub-regional data have to be made with the same period a year ago. This removes any seasonal distortions that may affect the figures, e.g. students entering and leaving full-time education.

The claimant count is accurate down to very small geographic areas and is unaffected by sampling variability since it is a 100% count. This means it can be used as an indicator of those without work down to small areas.

Unemployment, as measured by the LFS, has high sampling variability for areas below regional level. Thus changes in estimates of unemployment are difficult to interpret for local areas. Unemployment rates are calculated using the economically active population as the denominator.

6. Neighbourhood statistics

The Neighbourhood Statistics Service offers users ready access to a range of local data including the 2001 Census. Data can be viewed on-line or downloaded at no cost to users.

More information on Neighbourhood Statistics is available on the website at:

<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/neighbourhood>

7. The standardised monthly measure

Two international organisations, the Statistical Office of the European Union (Eurostat) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), publish a monthly rate of unemployment for each of their member countries.

These rates are calculated by taking the latest available data from each country's Labour Force Survey. For some countries, but not for the UK, the results are then projected forward using the recent movements shown by each country's administrative measure. Eurostat does extrapolate UK data using the claimant count to create a forecast EU average. However, while the UK's forecast figure is used in calculating the average, the figure itself is suppressed and never published.

The UK does not provide forecasts or support the publication of short-term forecasts for its data because the methodology is uncertain and the results can be unreliable. Short-term changes for individual countries often appear to be at odds with other data relating to that country.

The Eurostat unemployment rate for the UK is based on people aged between 16 and 74, whereas the UK unemployment rate published by the ONS is based on all people aged 16 and over. There are other minor definitional differences.

8. Wider concepts

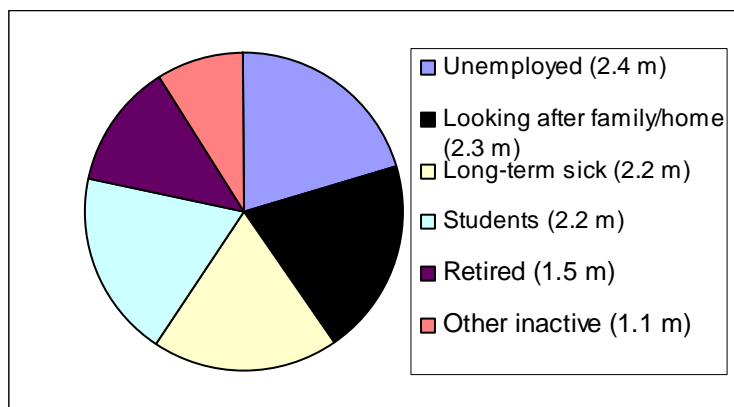
Some commentators and analysts use wider concepts. For example as well as unemployed people, they include people who are not employed but who do not meet the ILO definition of unemployment either because

- they have not been looking for work in the last 4 weeks, or
- they are not able to start work in the next two weeks.

Such people are classified as **economically inactive**. Many elderly people will fall into this category as they are retired and have no intention of working again. There are also a substantial number of people aged between 16 and 64 who are, for a variety of reasons, economically inactive. Figures published in the August 2010 *Labour Market Statistical Bulletin* showed that there were 9,352,000 economically inactive people aged from 16 to 64 in the UK. The LFS categorises economically inactive people by reason for inactivity (eg, student, looking after the family/home etc.). It also provides a breakdown between inactive people who want a job and those who do not want a job.

Chart E shows that, for April to June 2010 (seasonally adjusted) there were 11,790,000 jobless people aged between 16 and 64 in the UK. Within this total 2,438,000 were unemployed and 9,352,000 were economically inactive. The main categories within the economically inactive were those looking after the family and/or home, the long-term sick and students.

Chart E: Jobless people aged 16 to 64, UK: April to June 2010: seasonally adjusted



Commentators and analysts may sometimes wish to construct figures using wider concepts, incorporating some of these categories, depending on the particular issues they are considering.

9. Further Information

If you require further information on labour market statistics or have any enquiries related to this publication:

Labour Market Statistics Helpline

E-mail: labour.market@ons.gov.uk

Labour Force Survey Data Service

Phone: **01633 455678**
E-mail: lfdataservice@ons.gov.uk

The LFS Dataservice offers access to LFS data at two levels:

(i) National and Regional Level

LFS data at both national and regional (Government Office Region) level can be produced in tabulated format to customer specification. Data is provided electronically in Excel spreadsheet format (unless otherwise specified).

Provision exists whereby customers may purchase dial-up access to LFS datasets to conduct their own interrogation and analyses. More information is available on request.

(ii) Sub-National level

LFS data can also be provided in tabular format at sub-regional level. This enables information on a lower geographical scale than region to be provided enabling analysis at county level, local/unitary authority district level, travel-to-work area, etc. Data is again provided in Excel spreadsheet format (unless otherwise specified).

Research use of LFS

For research users, copies of LFS and claimant count cohort databases are available from the University of Essex Data Archive

Website: www.data-archive.ac.uk
Email: Archive@essex.ac.uk

Tel: 01206 872001

Data from Nomis®

Employment and unemployment data are available from the LFS (for local authority district level and above). Workforce jobs data are available for Government Office Regions and at country level. Claimant count data are available for wards and above.

Website: <http://www.nomisweb.co.uk>

Email: info@nomisweb.co.uk

Tel: 0191 334 2680

Economic and Labour Market Review

In January 2007 the *Labour Market Trends* and *Economic Trends* publications were replaced by a new publication *Economic and Labour Market Review*, which is available free on the National Statistics website: <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/elmr/>

Annual Employment Statistics (ABI)

Tel: 01633 456903

Email: annual.employment.figures@ons.gov.uk

Workforce Jobs

Tel: 01633 456776

Email: workforce.jobs@ons.gov.uk

National Statistics Public Enquiry Service

Tel: 0845 601 3034

Email: info@statistics.gov.uk

This and our other free publications:

How exactly is employment measured?

What exactly is the Labour Force Survey?

Guide to Labour Market Statistics Releases

Guide to Regional and Local Labour Market Statistics

are available on the National Statistics website at:

<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/onlineproducts/default.asp#labour>

Annex A

Labour Force Survey

Design

The Labour Force Survey is a sample survey of private households. Its design means that in any three month period:

- approx. 53,000 households in the UK will be interviewed;
- approx. 101,000 people aged 16 and over will be interviewed;
- representative results can be produced for the whole of the UK.

This allows publication of LFS results for the latest available three months every month. The LFS is designed to be representative of the private household population. Those excluded live in communal establishments and represent around 1 per cent of the population.

After the interviews have taken place, the results are processed. This gives figures for the population as a whole. However, not every household responds to the survey. Official mid-year population estimates give the total number of people living in each area by age group and gender. From this, factors can be constructed to ensure the published results reflect the entire household population.

How to compare over time

When quarterly results are published 12 times a year, there are several options for comparisons over time. The table below shows this:

Jan 2009	Feb 2009	Mar 2009	Apr 2009	May 2009	Jun 2009	Jul 2009	Aug 2009	Sep 2009	Oct 2009	Nov 2009	Dec 2009	Jan 2010	Feb 2010	Mar 2010
Teal														
	Green	Green	Green											
		Yellow												
			Teal		Teal									
				Green	Green	Green								
					Yellow	Yellow	Yellow							
						Teal	Teal	Teal						
							Green	Green	Green					
								Yellow	Yellow	Yellow				
									Teal	Teal	Teal			
										Green	Green	Green		
											Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	
												Teal	Teal	Teal

The shaded areas show the periods for which LFS results are available. For seasonally adjusted data, comparisons over time should be made with the periods shaded in similar colour, i.e. compare January to March 2010 with October to December 2009 or January to March 2009. Comparing January to March 2010 with December 2009 to February 2010 can give false indications. For data that are not seasonally adjusted, comparisons should be made with the same period a year ago.

Annex B

The claimant count

There are several groups of people who either are or are not eligible for benefits. This section presents a short summary of these.

Government supported trainees

People participating in long-term work related Government supported employment and training programmes are considered to be employed because they are either contributing directly to the production of goods and services or receiving training in the workplace. Those participating in employment programmes and who remain eligible for JSA continue to be included in the claimant count.

People who make themselves unemployed

People who leave their job without good reason, refuse employment without good cause or are dismissed for misconduct can have their benefits cut for up to 26 weeks. They can only receive income-based JSA if they can show they would otherwise suffer hardship. If people in this situation do claim, they will be included in the claimant count.

Couples who are married or living together

Claimants who are living with a partner who is earning may not be able to claim income-based JSA once their entitlement to contribution-based JSA finishes. However, they can claim National Insurance credits to preserve their future benefit entitlement including state pension. Those who do will be included in the claimant count.

The introduction of Joint Claims for Jobseeker's Allowance in March 2001, and extension of the policy in October 2002, means that both members of certain couples are now required to claim JSA jointly and both are required to look for work. This applies to couples without dependent children where at least one member was born after 28 October 1957 and is aged over 18. The claimant count continues to include all individual claimants, so some extra claimants are now included as a result of this policy.

Part-time workers

Part-time workers can claim JSA provided they work less than 16 hours a week. Their earnings are offset against their benefit entitlement. Their entitlement may be affected by the amount the claimant's partner earns. The claimant count includes part-timers if they claim on the day of the count.

People under 18

The majority of under 18s who are not in full-time education, employment or training are not entitled to income-based JSA. Instead, there is a guaranteed suitable training place for any 16 or 17 year old who wants one.

The long-term sick

Long-term illness or incapacity for work means that a person is ineligible for JSA and is therefore excluded from the claimant count. People in this position may, instead, claim Incapacity Benefit.

Annex C

Concepts and Definitions

Count of claimants of unemployment related benefits (claimant count) - The claimant count records the number of people claiming unemployment related benefits. Since October 1996 this has been the number of people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA). People claiming JSA must declare that they are out of work, capable of, available for and actively seeking work during the week in which the claim is made. They enter into a Jobseeker's Agreement setting out the action they will take to find work and to improve their prospects of finding employment.

Claimant count rate - The number of claimants resident in an area expressed as a percentage of the sum of claimants and workforce jobs in the area (mid-year estimates are used).

Claimant count proportion (for sub-regional comparisons) - The number of claimants resident in an area expressed as a proportion of the resident population aged from 16 to 64.

Economically active - people aged 16 and over who are either in employment or unemployed.

Economic activity rate - the percentage of people aged 16 and over who are economically active.

Economically inactive - people who are neither in employment nor unemployed. This group includes, for example, those who are looking after the family and/or home or retired.

Economic inactivity rate - The number of economically inactive people as a percentage of the total population aged 16 and over. This rate can be calculated for various age groups. The headline inactivity rate is the rate for those aged from 16 to 64.

Employment rate - the percentage of total in employment against all people in the relevant age group.

Employment - people aged 16 or over who did some paid work in the reference week (whether as an employee or self-employed); those who had a job that they were temporarily away from (on holiday, for example); those on government supported training and employment programmes; and those doing unpaid family work.

Full-time - In the *Labour Force Survey*, the respondents classify themselves as either full-time or part-time. However, people on government supported training and employment programmes who are at college in the reference survey week are classified, by convention, as part-time.

Government supported trainees - Those on government supported training programmes are included in the employee jobs estimate if they have a contract of employment. If, however, they do not have a contract of employment they are included in the workforce jobs estimate as government supported trainees.

Government supported trainees and employment programmes - These comprise all people aged 16 and over participating in one of the government's employment and training programmes (Youth Training, Work-based Learning for Adults), together with those on

similar programmes administered by the Learning and Skill Councils in England and Wales, or Local Enterprise Companies in Scotland.

Unemployment - refers to people without a job who were available to start work in the two weeks following their LFS interview and who had either looked for work in the four weeks prior to interview or were waiting to start a job they had already obtained. This definition of unemployment is in accordance with that adopted by the 13th International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS), further clarified at the 14th ICLS, and promulgated by the ILO in its publications.

Unemployment (rate) - the percentage of economically active people who are unemployed.

Seasonally adjusted - Adjusted for regular seasonal variations.